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SUBJECT: Freedom of Speech in Iraq 2006, Part I:
Media Gold Rush in a "Virtual" Marketplace

¶1. (U) This is the first in a series of cables that will address the media environment in Iraq in early 2006. Embassy PAS will review positive developments since liberation in 2003 (outlined below); examine popular attitudes on the limits of free speech; assess the Iraqi public broadcaster; and outline challenges presented by coalition and Iraqi government activities. The series will provide thumbnail sketches of the major outlets and players. Finally, it will review some suggestions for the U.S. and other donors who are interested in supporting free press as a key pillar of civil society.

¶2. (U) It is very difficult to define the "media market" in Iraq. There has never been anything quite like it in history: in post-war Germany and Japan, Allied forces owned the airwaves and controlled programming for years. There were already some elements of a market economy established in those countries, so once Allied broadcasters began permitting commercial channels and economic capacity resumed, media emerged according to market principles. Demographic homogeneity in those countries also limited the number of voices seeking outlets.

¶3. (U) Eastern Europe transformed peacefully, and thus commercial media emerged without competition from "combat zone" actors that one finds in Iraq. In Afghanistan, NGOs had pre-war experience and thus could identify elements of independent civil society; furthermore, the security situation there permits greater scope of operation for capacity-building and investment. The Balkans may offer the closest example, but Tito's Yugoslavia was more open than Saddam's Iraq and the change there came before journalism went totally electronic and digital, thus the skill gap was smaller. Furthermore, Iraq, with its importance to the global economy, global religion, and regional politics, is an automatic draw for anyone with a message. Not surprisingly, with so much in flux, there are some interesting dynamics.

¶4. (U) CPA abolished Iraq's ministry of information, which usefully denied the government a monopoly on news (although this move left 50,000 employees jobless). CPA also set up a legal framework for media (and telecommunications) regulation and public broadcasting modeled on BBC. CPA substantially funded technical training and new equipment for both these institutions and gave them guaranteed income (from the Treasury and telecom

licenses) to protect their independence.

¶5. (U) This environment proved enticing. As we highlighted in the embassy Human Rights Report for 2005, Iraq has advanced light years beyond Saddam-era prohibitions on free speech. The country has over 200 newspapers, at least 20 TV stations, and countless radio outlets; they function at the national, regional, and local levels, and broadcast in Arabic, Kurdish, Turkmen, and Syriac.

¶6. (U) Liberation set off an information "gold rush" as political parties, entrepreneurs, opportunists, exiles, foreign governments, and conscientious citizens swarmed to stake claims in a sector with enormous potential to shape opinions regionally. Indeed, the sector has surged faster than Iraq's media regulator can track them (the National Communications and Media Commission/ NCMC retains a CPA mandate to assign broadcast frequencies). As of January 2006, NCMC had licensed 108 entities: 28 terrestrial TV; 25 satellite TV; 41 FM radio; and 14 AM radio stations.

¶7. (SBU) In Iraq today, journalists frequently and openly criticize the government, ministers and senior officials with a freedom that is rare in the region. Perhaps 25% of the new outlets can be classified as "independent;" they express a wide variety of views, including mainstream Shia-flavored stations that are a first for the Arab world (COMMENT: a welcome change to Hizballah's al-Manar.)

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¶8. (SBU) Stations permit Iraqis to phone in questions to officials, and a few political satires have emerged to acclaim, such as al-Baghdadiya's "Dialog of the Deaf" and al-Sharqiya's show "Caricatures." December 2005 election programs featured live debates with multiple candidates, a novelty for the region. Although recently caught up in political crosscurrents, CPA legal structures and equipment are still in place to facilitate true public broadcasting by the Iraq Media Network.

¶9. (U) According to numerous polls (polling capability itself an indicator of new freedoms), the most widely watched television stations were independent al-Sharqiya and public broadcaster al-Iraqiya, along with Arabic-language satellite channels broadcasting from outside Iraq, such as al-Arabiya and al-Jazeera. Several other outlets are gaining popularity, such as entertainment channel al-Sumeria.

¶10. (SBU) There are other indications of new maturity in Iraq's media world: Private funding, external printing, limited ads and text messaging services are providing some reliable income streams. A September 2005 story by a reporter for the Institute of War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), which trains journalists in Iraq, confirms this, reporting a veritable boom in independent shops "printing books, pamphlets and newspapers prohibited under the old government." Partly this is driven by newspapers themselves. The piece noted that "in Baghdad alone, there are 80 titles with a combined daily circulation of 200,000." A new independent news agency - National Iraqi News Agency (NINA), supported by USAID, has helped Iraqi journalists to support over 100,000 visits per month on its website and now has a link with BBC Arabic news.

¶11. (U) Elections last year further boosted the industry, allowing printers to buy presses and computer applications. One employee at Ibn-Khaldoon print shop told IWPR he had paid 60,000 USD for a new press, suddenly affordable with "monthly incomes averaging 2040 USD."

¶12. (U) There are also more and more local TV and broadcasting production companies who can be contracted by the stations to produce shows. The Embassy Public Affairs section is aware of at least ten such companies, capabilities are fairly professional, and certainly more attuned culturally to the Iraqi scene than Egyptian, Lebanese and Gulf Arab competitors who are still technically far more savvy.

¶13. (U) A definitive piece on Iraq's media freedoms by freelance journalist Jill Carroll in mid-2004, just before CPA handed the reins to a sovereign Iraqi government, quoted Nada Shawkat, women's editor at Az Zaman newspaper, rejoicing that she could finally "practice her trade free of many restrictions imposed on the press after the war with Kuwait."

¶14. (SBU) Unlike other entrepreneurs eyeing Iraq, media investors are able to locate much of their infrastructure (safely) offshore. We see satellite TV stations now targeting the Iraqi market from Dubai (al-Fayha'), Kuwait (al-Anwar), Cairo and Lebanon (al-Baghadiya), and London (al-Sharqiya, al-Zaman). Al-Furat newspaper began publishing from Paris, where its expatriate editor lived for over a decade. These outlets are harbingers of other private investment in Iraq, sure to follow when security improves.

Trial by (Gun)fire

¶15. (SBU) Iraq's global strategic importance and the pace and volume of events here thrust local actors onto a global stage. They have literally learned on the fly, observing seasoned Western journalists at joint press conferences and competing with them for top stories. That has

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honed talent. Locals have also reaped a bonus from the eviction by then-PM Allawi of al-Jazeera, which had it been here, would have probably crushed much of the local competition by dint of pure competence.

¶16. (U) Carroll's piece highlighted a bittersweet side of this media boon. Security threats and impenetrable political and cultural environments have thrown up formidable barriers to foreign journalists, who rely substantially on intrepid local talent. Most foreigners now rely on Iraqi legwork and add flavor with "stand ups" from (relatively safe) hotel balconies. Carroll's 2004 piece quoted a Baghdad bureau chief of an American newspaper noting "after three decades of secret police, oppression and propaganda about the West, there's much distrust of outsiders." Indeed, these phenomena persist in 2006; reliance on Iraqis is likely to rise with the tragic January abduction of Carroll and the near-fatal injury sustained by ABC anchor Bob Woodruff.

¶17. (U) In late 2005, we saw bylines from several Iraqis in major media outlets: Mohammed Hayder reporting from Basra for Newsweek; Qassim Abdul-

Zahra and Murtada Faraj from Baghdad, Yahya Barzanji from Kirkuk, Ali Ahmed from Ramadi, Haider Hani in Amara, Gahid Jabbar from Karbala and Zeki Hamad from Tikrit, Haider Hani in Amarahall for AP; Mahmud al-Rawi reported for Al-Jazeera; Hala Jaber for the London Sunday Times; and Ghaith Abdul Ahad reported on insurgents for the Guardian and Washington Post. Even banned Al-Jazirah uses stringers, like Falih Abd-al-Qadir who reported from Al-Qa'im on December elections.

Iraq Gets a Media Pool

¶18. (U) The Iraqi media has acquired important professional capacity. Since April, 2005 over 1,000 Iraqi journalists and managers have received technical training from USAID on investigative journalism and strategic management. Over two hundred journalists have received informal training by working with MNFI and Embassy press officers, and up to 100 have participated in PAS exchange programs in the U.S. and the region. The U.S. has also invested heavily in infrastructure and training for both Iraq's independent media and telecommunications regulator and the Independent Media Network, both established by CPA.

¶19. (U) While the media has not replaced Saddam-era unions, they did organize a national media pool, driven by constraints on access to sites (such as the Saddam trial courthouse). With much coaching by MNFI public affairs officers, several outlets agreed in September 2005 to form the Iraqi National Media Pool (INMP). The INMP is managed by the media for the media, with notable democratic flair.

¶20. (U) The pool management team was selected by Bureau Chiefs in September. Members of the INMP share output from INMP print, radio and television representatives, and rotate these slots monthly. The pool has notably boosted Iraq media access and thus coverage. This in turn prompts public buy-in for key events such as the Abu Ghraib detainee release, NATO HQ opening, Fallujah anniversary, Khor Az Zubayr power plant opening, and Mosul transition of authority.

¶21. (U) The INMP is open to all Arabic outlets. It has 52 members, including Asharq Al-Awsat and al-Arabiya TV (pan-Arab), and Addustour, Azzaman, Al-Mada and Al-Mashriq (Iraqi). Nine radio stations include Radio Sawa, Radio BBC Arabic, Radio Monte Carlo, and Kurdistan Radio. Three of the top five TV stations in Iraq - Al-Arabiya, Al-Sharqiya, al-Hurra -- also belong. With pan-Arab members, the pool thus also provides a launchpad for regional dissemination and provides a forum for the transfer of know-how to nascent Iraqi outlets.

Comment

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¶22. (SBU) There are many promising new "shoots" and many more seeds that have been planted in Iraq for free and independent media that can serve as a model to the region. These shoots, as we will see from subsequent cables, still require care and feeding from interested outsiders. More critical will be the continued support from an Iraqi government that may not feel at ease with the unfamiliar press "watchdog" that purports to track both its achievements and setbacks.

